Young Finnish people of Muslim background : Creating þÿ Spiritual Becomings and Coming Communities

Oikarinen-Jabai, Helena

2019-02-01

Oikarinen-Jabai , H 2019 , ' Young Finnish people of Muslim background : Creating þÿ Spiritual Becomings and Coming Communities in Their Artworks ' , Studies , vol. 3 , no. 1 , pp. 148-160 . https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2019-0013

http://hdl.handle.net/10138/300675
https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2019-0013

Research Article

Helena Oikarinen-Jabai*

Young Finnish People of Muslim Background: Creating "Spiritual Becomings" and "Coming Communities" in Their Artworks

https://doi.org/10.1515/culture-2019-0013
Received May 28, 2018; accepted January 4, 2019

Abstract: In this essay I discuss artworks by a sample of young people with a Muslim background who participated in the *Numur—Islam and I* exhibition, which was organised as part of the Young Muslims and Resilience (2016-2018) research project. Art exhibitions were staged in November 2017 and March 2018 with eighteen young adult participants/co-researchers. Their artworks included video and textile installations, photo collages, paintings, calligraphy and poetry, dealing with issues such as faith, dialogues between religious communities, gender, belonging and sexual diversity. Here I concentrate on some works by the participants who stated that they leaned on Sufism or spirituality in their working processes, or whose works expressed qualities that may be reflected through the spectrum in which rhizomes of Sufi ways of understanding human existence in the world are present. In their artworks, the participants created fresh ideas about possible encounters, which I interpret as being linked to modern and postmodern ideas of relationships between spaces and "becoming communities." Likewise, these ideas can be traced to our common philosophical heritage, which is partly based on spiritual mystic thought and practices of different religions. By using art, the participants could embody this legacy, create spaces for themselves and open landscapes for discussions between Muslim believers and people with different religions and worldviews.

Keywords: art-based and performative approaches, ethnopoesis, gender and sexuality, spirituality, Sufism, transformative actions.

Brief Summary of the Study

The approach of this study[1] was interdisciplinary and involved performative and art-based approaches. I mostly worked with five female participants/co-researchers, and my male colleagues focused on working with five male participants.[2] The female participants started by taking photographs focusing on issues that were important and empowering for them, and I also video recorded some of the places that they found significant. After looking at the visual material together, they started to plan and make artworks for the exhibition that was staged in Helsinki in 2017 and in Turku,[3] a smaller city in Finland, in 2018. Most of them worked independently, and we met regularly during the process. Also, an art student was involved in helping with issues such as video shooting and editing, when needed. The male participants' work process

1 Young Muslims and Resilience—A Participatory Study (2016-2018) was conducted at the University of Helsinki, Faculty of Social Sciences and funded by Kone Foundation.

2 During the research period, the composition of the male researchers who worked mainly with the male participants changed.

3 The exhibition was held in November 2017 at Stoa, the Cultural Center of Eastern Helsinki, which is located in an area with a multicultural population, and at the Migration Institute of Finland, Turku in March 2018. The exhibition was funded by Kone Foundation, Helsinki-Uusimaa Regional Council and Art Promotion Centre Finland.

***Corresponding author: Helena Oikarinen-Jabai,** University of Helsinki, E-mail: h.oikarinen.jabai@gmail.com

started later due to the difficulties in finding participants and changes in the research team; thus, there was less involvement in the research process. However, the idea behind the process in each case was similar: to explore their resilience and belonging by leaning on visual and artistic practices.

There were also some other young participants with whom I had already started to work earlier or who were invited—without the longer research process—to take part in and present their artworks at the exhibition. At the exhibitions, 18 young people presented their art and productions, such as photographs, paintings, collages, poems and video and textile installations. Moreover, several young Muslim activists participated in organising seminars and happenings during the exhibitions.

The participants were a heterogeneous group in many ways. They were of various ethnic backgrounds, ages (aged between 20-35 years) and genders, as well as religious backgrounds. There were both Shias and Sunnis in the group, and the participants' relationships to religion differed from each other. Either both parents or one parent of each participant was Muslim, and all related to Islam, but not all defined themselves as devoted believers. The female participants, in particular, dealt with religious identity as one of their multiple intersecting identifications and in most cases, it was not in focus during their art-making process. Many of the male participants were Muslim activists, and most of their works were more connected with Muslim identities. Most of the seminars and happenings organised during the exhibition had a religious agenda.

In this essay, I concentrate on the artworks of those participants, who somehow presented or leaned on certain spiritual perspectives and poetic qualities in approaching and challenging ideas connected to gender, belonging, sexual diversity and dialogues and spaces in between cultures and religious communities. In doing this, they also challenged the categorisation of Muslims as an essential expression for a group of people with multiple and varied backgrounds (cf. Ernst).

Positioning Myself and the Study

In my mother's stories, traditional pantheistic beliefs and Christian narratives merged in visions in which animal visitors brought messages, and corpses of harassed women wandered in wetlands looking for a day of nemesis. Jesus was one of the wandering characters whose shadow acted on my dreams together with unknown soldiers to remind me of the mortality of sinful humankind. Perhaps because of the valetudinarian spiritual visitors, I planned to become a doctor. My mother thought that it was a good idea because then she and I could move to India, perhaps to be closer to numerous divine creatures. Anyhow, she moved to the spiritual world, and I rambled for years back and forth on the streams of the underworld.

Even though I left the protestant church (into which I was baptised at birth) in my teenage years, my interest in religion and spirituality did not disappear. I loved to have conversations with people from different religious backgrounds. When I moved to Sweden, it was easy to meet representatives of various religions and find diverse spiritual followers in my neighbourhood. Studying physical theatre at school, influenced by Jerzy Grotowski's ideas, which lean on traditional and spiritual practices, invited me to touch the embodied qualities of indigenous, Afro-Caribbean and Asian aesthetics and communion.

Gambia was the first country I lived in that had a mainly Muslim population. At that time, the spiritual practices of this part of West Africa were syncretistic mixtures consisting of local traditions, Islam and other Middle-Eastern religions. Stories of ancestral spirits living in trees and wandering in the Savannah reminded me of my mother's narrations, and I loved to visit and talk to traditional herbalists and marabouts, healers who mix traditional West African healing practices and Islamic knowledge.

The time in the Gambia made me interested in the common roots of the Middle Eastern religions, as well as their varied paths to different parts of the world. I became especially interested in childhood and youth cultures and gender inquiry in different cultural contexts, and many of my studies are connected to the embodiment and transformation of gender and social roles by aesthetic and artistic practices and communication. Even though I have not always focused on religion or spirituality, these aspects have been present as an important element in the fields in which I have moved, whether in Africa, the Caribbean or Scandinavia.

In my previous study (2009-2015),[4] in which participating young Finns with immigrant and/or minority backgrounds explored their sense of belonging and identification using art and media-based methods, it became obvious that those participants of Muslim background in particular—because of the attitudes and prejudices of society and the majority population—were forced to reflect on their religious identifications, as well as their ethnic, "racial" and national identities (Oikarinen-Jabai). The performative approaches and audio-visual methods employed in the study assisted the participants in dealing with questions of belonging and othering by emphasising the strength and multi-faceted nature offered by outsider positions. This, in turn, made possible the negotiation of a form of cultural citizenship that combined different homes, nations, and senses of belonging.

In this study, most of the participants or their parents (parent) had an immigrant background and participants explored their subject positions, resilience and relationship to Islam through creative practices. In their artworks and the discussions related to the process of making their art pieces, they investigated their diverse subject positions, positionings and identifications, connected to ethnicity, race, language, nationality gender and sexuality. For many of the participants, spirituality, ecumenic approaches and/or and ideas related to Sufism seemed to be important in approaching their positionings and sources of empowerment. Also, by leaning on these perspectives, the participants created potential spaces, landscapes of hope and fresh discourses.

Dialogues through Spectrum

To be in dialogue with the artworks of young participants, I was supported by the notion of "unfinished knowledge" (Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation*), which allows the acceptance of "rootings" and "shiftings" and recognizes the epistemological standpoints of different research participants as part of the research process (Yuval-Davis, *Power, Intersectionality and the Politics of Belonging*). The idea of unfinished knowledge originates in Martin Buber's notion of dialogue, in which "I" encounters another person not as an objectified "it" but as part of an interconnected "I-Thou" relationship. According to Buber, this kind of connection is also the foundation of artistic practice and works of art.[5]

As suggested by some of the participants and some of the visitors to the exhibitions, I started to familiarise myself with Sufism and found that texts concerning Sufi philosophy and practices were in many ways related to the ideas that Buber developed in his book *I and Thou* (1970, originally 1923). This was to be expected because Buber's work uttered a desire to go get back to the roots of Judaism, before the Talmud, and maybe even before the prophet Moses (Nikkanen). Furthermore, it is well known that the mysticism of all Middle-Eastern religions has common roots and is influenced by Hinduism and other Asian religions (Nizamie, Katzhu and Uvais, Subhan). Buber also discusses Hinduism and Buddhism in opening the understanding of the reciprocity of the I-Thou relation.

In his book, *Sufism and Surrealism* the Syrian-born writer and poet Adonis compares these two isms, formed at different times in human history. He claims that both Sufism and Surrealism answered the needs of their own times to understand the unspoken, the unseen and the unknown questions that reason, religious orthodoxy or science could not explain. The ultimate goal of the Sufi is to become one of the absolute, invisible. The Surrealist is also interested in the nature of the absolute that may be God, reason, matter itself thought or spirit. Both paths lead to a "return that assumes an alteration in the one who is at the same time returning to and merging with the origin" (Adonis). Both Sufism and Surrealism also emphasise artistic and poetic expression as a route to Oneness and touching that which seems impossible to touch (Adonis 8-9).

In present post-discourses we often refer to hybrid transformative cultural and metaphoric spaces as paths to create new forms and understanding of our embodied realms, expressions, beliefs, emotions and subject positions (cf. Anzaldua, Ashcroft, Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, Minh-ha). Nevertheless, Plato in *Timaeus* (c. 360 BC) spoke about a third genus, Khóra,

4 A Finn, a Foreigner, or a Transnational Hip-hopper? Participatory Art-Based Research on the Identification Negotiations and Sense of Belonging of Second-Generation Finnish Immigrant Youth (Aalto University).

5 According to Nina Perlina, Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of dialogue and art are also related to Buber's discussions.

that is neither being nor non-being, but can be this or that, and is formed in dreamlike hybrid reasoning, behind the divided mythos/logos (Derrida, 89-90).[6] The Sufi philosopher Ibn 'Arabi[7] (1165-1240) wrote about *barzakh*, the intermediate world, as the site in which things are transformed, i.e. as the site of images and revelations (Adonis 59).

In his article *The Divinity in Our Relationships: A Dialogue Between Buber and Shabestari* (1288-1340) Luke Nikkanen compares the ideas presented in Shabestari's *The Garden of Mystery* and Buber's *I and Thou*. Nikkanen argues that even though Buber's ideas may be secular at heart, and Shabestari seems to rely more on religion, both can be read as understanding God as a metaphor, as something that can be found in our interactions with one another. While Buber sees the relationship with God and Other as unpredictable, Shabestari does not see the same difference between I-You relations and objectifying I-it relations as Buber, because in the end they all belong to the same unity, and We are God and God is in us (Nikkanen).

Earlier I used the idea of the spectrum as a metaphor for a space that helps to reflect, present and understand narratives that are based on intersectional translocal experiences and visions (Oikarinen-Jabai, Anthias, Anzaldua, Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*). I think that the notion of spectrum is also suitable in this context, in which texts from different times and traditions are read beside each other in order to understand the rhizomes of conversations of young people who brought to their works the themes or ideas connected to Sufism. When reading the quote from Shabestari (Nikkanen): "Nonbeing is a mirror, the world its reflection, and man is the eye of this reflection, beholding the hidden Viewer. You are the reflection's eye and It the light of the eye. The Light of the eye is seeing itself through your eye! The universe is human and the human a universe," I can see the human as an embodied playing spectrum that all the time reflects light, perceptions, sensations, affections, emotions, narrations and that which is unknown, in relation to the other.

There have also been female Sufi masters and poets, but the story of Middle-Eastern religions and mysticism, as well as most other religions, has been a patriarchal (his)story (Ahmed, Armour, Irigaray, *Key Writings*). As Luce Irigaray put it, the task of spirituality in our age is to become capable of mutual transmission of the energy that is not subject to the same truth. She considers this to be also known by encountering the spiritually autonomous person of the other sex. For understanding the intermediate the spiritual attraction between the sexes, we would also need to be able to imagine the other's absolute, which would then not really be the other (Irigaray 173). Adapting Irigaray's idea, in a spectrum gender would also be refracted as multiple and endlessly becoming.

As I describe and observe the artworks of the participants on the next few pages, the writing process is also a pathway for myself to search for connecting ideas and theoretical frames. Even though these ideas may just be reflections on the horizon of the spectrum, I will point out various possible theoretical directions from the route side—perhaps to understand better the transgressive quality of poetry and imagination. Kind of a pillar where I join a potpourri of theoretical frames is a notion of the "ethnopoesis" (Aitken). Ethnopoetry as a method is an attempt to present the non-presentable embedded in people, places and cultural, artistic practices, which helps us to understand the creative potentiality of playful and transformative actions of young people in intersecting spaces (Aitken 1-7).

Sufi-Masa, Inside/Outside the Box and Letter to My Daughter

According to Gilles Deleuze and Feliz Guattari (70), art-based research practices manifest themselves as (poststructural) erosive pathways, flowing over, through around and under scientific and social scientific, quantitative, and qualitative epistemologies in a rhizomatic filigree of "micro-becomings" (Rolling). In our project, religious discourses, epistemologies and even ontologies were also present in the artworks of the participants, creating stories and images that were on the border of escaping meaning— and creating new kinds of dialogues and "spiritual becomings" (cf. St. Pierre).

6 For Julia Kristeva (1993, 95) "khora" is a metaphor for the semiotic time in the mother's arms before language and its regulations rule the world of a child, and there is no separation between the inner and outside world.

7 Ibn 'Arabi (1165-1240) lived mainly in Spain and died in Damascus. He is one of the best-known Sufi philosophers.

The artwork that was directly linked to Sufism was a textile installation, Sufi-Masa, which depicts a spinning dervish dancer (Figure 1). The artist is a textile designer of Kurdish background. First, she planned to make a dress that merged Kurdish and Finnish traditional and modern styles, but then during the process, she changed the topic. She emphasised that she is a spiritual person, and appreciates practices like yoga and meditation. Her condition for participating in the exhibition was that the title should not refer literally to young Muslims, but to young people with Muslim backgrounds. After discussion with all participants, the name of the exhibition became *Numur— Islam and I*.[8]

Figure 1. The Sufi-Masa installation.

In the exhibition catalogue, she writes that Rumi[9] and his poems inspired her work, which is one vision of a dervish dancer. As Rumi approaches everything with love and patience, so she also approached her process of creating the dancer, even though she encountered challenges while making her piece. The calligraphy "Al-Khabir" painted on the skirt of Sufi-Masa means being in a trance—the deep existence; the calligraphy "As-Salaam" painted on his coat means peace, and the script "Shams Tabriz" embroidered on the top of his hat means deep friendship. When the dancer continued his peaceful meditation in dark November days,

8 Numur referring to an Arabic word that means a group of young tigers.

9 Persian born Sufi mystic Rumi, Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Balkhi (1207-1273) is one of the world's most famous poets.

he was like a mediator who attracted the people seeing his movement through large brightly-lit windows to come closer, and for a moment meet him as You, like the air one breathes (cf. Buber 45, Nikkanen). As was the case for us, the members of the research group, for most of the visitors the moment they entered the exhibition hall and met Sufi-Masa seemed to be a touching experience, and children, in particular, appeared enthusiastic about the encounter. Some visitors had seen dervish dancers during their tourist trips, but the spiritual dimension was not familiar to many of them.

As Adonis (143) suggests, whether Sufism is regarded as pious or heretical, its writings and ideas represent a gnostic upheaval in the history of Arab-Islamic thought. Even though there has been a theological conflict between the dogmatically orthodox and Sufi interpretations of the Quran, Sufism has spread across different parts of the Islamic world and as part of both Sunni and Shia traditions (Green, Nizamie, Katzhu & Uvais, Subhan). Nile Green points out that Sufi mysticism has always been rooted in the tradition of the Prophet and Sufis have been conscious of their expansive links with precedents. Sufis have also had discursive, miraculous and economic power throughout Islamic history (Green 1-8). It was obvious in the exhibition that Masa spoke personally to many of the Muslim guests, arousing either positive or antagonistic feelings. Some visitors expressed their dislike of such "profane" work in the exhibition and denied its belonging to any Muslim or Sunni tradition altogether. One visitor was especially touched by the mat and encircled space under the dancing character. She said that it reminded her of the blessed atmosphere that her father's prayer moments created in the middle of everyday life.

As dervish dancers are mostly male, so was Sufi-Masa. In the corner of the exhibition was a closet covered with black cloth that a visitor could step into and watch a video in which a young female participant moved in Finnish cultural landscapes and met Finnish "national" artworks displayed in the Ateneum, the Finnish National Gallery. Outside this chamber, the creator (a young woman with a Somali background), hung snapshots from her trips to a range of countries and places and items that she had found empowering in connection with nature, architecture and design. In this installation, entitled *Inside/Outside the Box*, the inventor wanted to deal with her feelings of exclusion and being an outsider. She highlighted that, as a young Somali woman who grew up in Finland, she often feels that most Finns, as well as her own ethnic and religious community, have expectations and ideas that restrict her life and challenge her to be herself and even realise her dreams.

Even though she said that she is more interested in and more influenced by modern Western and Scandinavian art and design ideas than artistic and architectural practices connected to Arab-Islamic or North-African traditions, I think that her work could also be viewed through the spectrum of Sufism to illuminate the fragments of her work. According to Adonis (63), to Ibn 'Arabi imagination is the greatest of beings, even though it is in constant motion, existing-non-existing-existing, known-unknown and negative-positive at the same time. In Inside/Outside the Box, the creator counteracts the dominant discourses by intermediating her subjecthood from the state of imagination and with her sense of inner understanding (Adonis 63-64). There are no truly static images in this black and white video, which is given rhythm by nature and town sounds and whose charm lies in the hypnotic vibration of multi-layered readings that, by emphasizing silence, difference and potential hidden colourfulness, blur the insider/outsider dichotomy (cf. Minh-ha *Elsewhere, Within Here* 114).

The other video work, *A Letter to My Daughter*, made by a young Finnish-Iranian woman during her daughter's first years, was a more direct statement of female identity, motherhood and religion. In the exhibition catalogue, she wrote that marriage and motherhood had deepened her understanding of the relationship between the human being and God. "Islam is my life, and my life is Islam. It is a peace that can be reached by physical and spiritual balance." Even in her preliminary photo and video work, she had already uttered that Rumi is one of her favourite writers and Sufism is close to her heart. Her Studio was in the Shia Cultural Centre/Mosque, and she explained that her wish was to take down the curtain that separated men and women during the religious ceremonies. We used a photo in which she had shot her feet as she stood on her prayer mat, as a heading for our project's website (Figure 2).

Figure 2. My prayer mat.

The incident that later ensued around this photo, when presented in the mosaic print at the background of the preliminary poster advertising the exhibition, brought to light doctrinal issues that created tensions during the research process and especially in the context of the exhibition. Some male participants commented that it was inappropriate to present the exhibition with the poster including naked female feet because a Muslim audience could feel insulted. Someone from the research group— it was not certain who—decided to cut the image of feet from the poster without bringing the issue to the common discussion.

This made me look at the photo and its spiritual and divine expressions through diverse eyes. I knew that the participants had different views of religion: there were participants of Sunni and Shia backgrounds[10], some participants belonged to religious organisations, some practised religion infrequently, and for some religion was a part of their background. The photographer of this poster was a deeply devout Muslim and practised religion daily. Why did some people think they had the right to say if the photo she had chosen to present an empowering thing in her life was pious enough?

Irigaray argues that the loss of differentiation and the predominance of a model of the Absolute in relation to believers, which is typical for patriarchal religions, must be challenged in our multicultural times. The everyday contact with other traditions and the evolution of relations between the sexes *leads us from a universal morality inscribed within each of us, towards ethics which considers particularities, differences, contingencies*. This involves us rediscovering the other as other, and along with him or her, to invent a style of comportment that could not pre-exist our encounter without risking the other in his or her alterity (Irigaray 175). Irigaray's idea seems to be in harmony with Sufism, which emphasises the individual's abilities to have divine encounters and a deeper appreciation of the world (Nikkanen). Adonis (176) writes that in Islam the artist sees "through the eye of the heart" and through his work "overturns" the world, in order to take it close to the mysterious and invisible.

Adonis (174) states that technology separates man from matter, but I think that photography makes it possible to sanctify and immortalise the captured moment (Barthes, Minh-ha *Elsewhere, Within Here* 88). For me, the photo of the prayer mat invites the viewer to share a sacred moment with the photographer at the same time as it speaks of the photographer's relation to her You (cf. Buber). According to Adonis, idolatry is abandoned in Islamic non-representational interpretation of art. But the divine image is not an image, it is a bringing to being, the image of other creation (Adonis 163-166), like the prayer mat where human, secret and social elements merge, allowing the spectator to perceive the multiple rhizomes that connect us historically, spiritually, socially and through embodied existence.

10 Items on the praying mat refer to Shia tradition, and she discussed their background deeply in her video interview, which we conducted at the mosque.

Poetic Expressions of the "Coming Community"

Many of the participants said that they were constantly reminded to see themselves from the perspective of the outsider or third party because of their cultural "racial" and religious backgrounds and "difference" (cf. Fanon 112). In their artworks, they often returned to the topic and were able to look at their subjectivities through the spectrum that challenged regulatory regimes and re-invented fresh narratives of citizenship by presenting multiple stories. In these narrations, they linked their historical and cultural roots and routes and sense of belonging to multiple homes (cf. Ahmed, Ashcroft, Bhabha, "Culture's In-Between," Hall).

One of the participants who took part only in the second exhibition was a wood designer with a Finnish-Palestinian background. In the exhibition catalogue, he explained about his grandfathers, from whom he got his name. Through them, he belongs to both Finnish and Palestinian cultures, but he said that he feels that he is never completely at home in either of them. He wrote that even though the Quran and the Bible bear Wisdom, they are not absolute: both contain fragments of truth. He dwells in between two worlds, looking for truth. In the dualistic world, light cannot exist without darkness and courage without fear, and this dualism is expressed in the contrast of light and dark tones of his woodwork. In the exhibition, he presented wooden jewellery and six poems, carved on wooden plates, and influenced by Islamic mystics. In one of the poems he writes:

> I did not come to you to condemn humanity as unchanging in the chains of mercilessness. A human being has to have the right to take missteps. And the mistaken has to have the right to be a human being.
> I did not come here to see only a part of your soul. At nightfall you lose your fear, in the daylight you face your shadow.
> I did not come here to accept the foolish words of the wise, nor to deny the wise words of the fool. I am here to guide you to the balance of your thoughts and to listen to the unity.
> I came here to aid you; to taste the love of existence through you. I am in your hand shake, in the joy and sorrow of your eyes. I am the guardian of your ataraxia. I am the deepest voice of your intuition. I am as the forefathers were to me: echoing in your spirit and in the cells of your body since the dawn of time. A whisper of a truth seeker, which drifts through spaces between the worlds (trans. by the poet).

Sufism has laid the fundamentals for a form of writing that is based on subjective experience, in a culture that is largely based on established religious knowledge. "The text is the Sufis homeland and their reality; it is as if they move about inside this text and create in it and through it the world which they dream" (Adonis 95-96). Adonis states that when the discussion is a dialogue between the I and you, between God and man, without the intermediators of learning or tradition, the discussion and knowledge become a changing state (between the individuals and inside the individual), which has no permanence, rejecting anything that is pre-set and narrow. This kind of Sufi gnosis/knowledge that wells up in the present and does not come from past knowledge is reflected in the creation of the poem above. Epistemologically, this approach is also close to Buber's idea of the dialogue between I and Thou, and Yuval-Davis' notion of unfinished knowledge, allowing the presence of refracting rays of different in-between spaces and offering the reader the chance not to know but to "live" and "explore" (not transfer) (cf. Adonis 97).

Also, the experience and exploration of home, homing desire, horizontal and transversal spaces and border crossing cultural citizenship were expressed in many of the artworks presented at the exhibition (cf. Ashcroft, Brah, "Difference, Diversity, Differentiation," Hua). In the research catalogue, a female participant of Sudanese background stated that in her artworks—short poems set on Sudanese embroidered fabric in a vitrine (Figure 3)—as a young person and a person of immigrant background, she focuses on finding herself and finding her identity in between the two cultures, to explore where religion is situated in her life and how as a young Muslim, she identifies herself as a Finn. In one of her poems she writes:

> Skin of the colour of heated sand in the Sahara Desert. Sins washed by the river Nile, where my name is carried on the lands of the black Pharaohs. Still my heart belongs to the country of crystal snow and Santa Claus. Here is where my home is....!

In the catalogue, she wrote that music, dance and poetry had always been dear to her, and this is reflected in her art piece. Like her male colleague, she wanted to bring multimodal experiences in her writing and to

weave together layers of her history and multiple embodied belongings. In creating "potential spaces," she could play with diverse ideas of her cultural citizenship (Hua, O'Neill, "Transnational Refugees" 3)

As Maggie O'Neill ("Making Connections: Ethno-mimesis, Migration and Diaspora." *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*) claims, art-based approaches are especially beneficial in dealing with transnational and diasporic experiences because they allow the intertextuality of biography/narratives and art to become a "potential space" for transformative possibilities. Aitken states that border crossings help young people to explore the transformation, and strengthen the spatial displacements, which enable becoming the "other." Minh-ha (*Elsewhere, Within Here* 94) claims that artistic performative presentations are able to create bridges between individuals, genres and cultures and lead us towards the other side of speech and as representations through which no narrative can describe the opened boundary between different ways of sensing the world.

Elizabeth St. Pierre's term "nomadic inquiry" refers to a (writing) method that trusts possible border crossings, the merging of experienced and collected/produced material, and the insights that these processes can offer. Such exploration and writing, which departs from representationalism and interpretation, is in a state of continuous transformation on the border of escaping meaning (St. Pierre). Irigaray introduces "woman's writing," which is based on diversity and the potential of inherent embodied sexuality and spirituality. Hélène Cixous created the idea and practice of "ecriture feminine," which refers to writing that is unconventional, absurd and mysterious, and as pre-linguistic, undermines the significations of the logic of phallocentric language, opening up fresh thought-provoking meanings.[11] For her, words always lead somewhere other than we expect and this incalculable is the text's promise; neither the reader nor author is aware of the event of revelation (xii). The ideas that St. Pierre, Irigaray and Cixous introduced interconnect with Sufi ideas of writing, for example when it comes to the goal of the text to mediate that which is irrational, unspoken and embodied (cf. Adonis).

These poststructuralist thinkers have also engaged with the texts of Georges Bataille and Maurice Blanchot, who were interested in communions and communication in the present world. Bataille created the idea of unknown community, Blanchot posited the idea of unavowable community (Blanchot, Mitchell & Winfree). Giorgio Agamben B developed their notions, leaning on medieval scholars and theorists of Judeo-Christian scripture, among other philosophers, creating the idea of the "Coming Community," which can be formed of individualities who refuse the criteria of belonging. I think that such an exploration of ethics, established beyond subjectivity and ideology, has been the concern of many Sufi philosophers, as well as mystics of other religions. The male participant whose poem was discussed earlier said that he took his inspiration for his writing from Islamic mystics. When he writes that the deepest voice of intuition is "a whisper of a truth seeker, which drifts through spaces between the worlds," for me it reveals an aspiration and route towards the "Coming Community," which abandons prevailing doctrines and orthodox interpretations on its journey and is interested more in "interspirituality" than "interfaith" (Adonis 8; Brehmer).

Figure 3. Two poems from the installation. The second says: The beauty of the beast lies in his heart. Why would we teach our children that since adults rarely look beyond beards and headwraps?

11 See also Julia Kristeva (1993, 95) "khora," as pre-linguistic "semiotic" mother-centred signifying process that disrupts the standard masculine 'symbolic' discourse.

Alternative Gender Perspectives

One participant, a Finnish-Lebanese woman, explored her relationship with Islam and especially questions concerning Queer Muslims in her paintings, poems and collages. Furthermore, in her studies, she is continuing to investigate whether Sufism allows multiple gender positions and queer identities to be included in Islam. In her introduction to the second exhibition catalogue[12] she says that her relationship with Islam is complex, and the dominant patriarchal interpretations of the religion that support inequality do not resonate with her. She states that many customs and practices that maintain discrimination between the believers are not based on divine texts, but rather embody frozen patriarchal power structures. Even though she wants to avoid all kinds of classifications, her own approach to Islam is related to Sufism. Her initiator and teacher of Islam was her uncle, a wise poet and a translator, who approached life and religion with an open mind, and with whom she loved to contemplate the profound dimensions of existence. His legacy inspired her to participate in the project, she adds.

The most popular Finnish academic on-line translator explains the English word "queer" with connotations such as (pertaining to) non-normative sexuality, homosexual, slightly unwell, odd, different, a person of atypical sexuality or sexual identity. It appears that heterosexual gender positions are the norm in the Finnish dictionary, even though the law allows non-heterosexual marriages. What about states that deny or criminalise non-heterosexual relations, as many Muslim and Christian countries do (cf. Hamzic, Ernst 150, Jama)? Queer identities are often unspoken and invisible in Muslim countries; sometimes, like in some parts of Indonesia, diverse gender subjectivities have traditionally been accepted as part of society (Davies, Hamzic, Jama). Consequently, it was no surprise that in the context of the *Numur—Islam and I* exhibition the topic was somewhat veiled. It is absurd that even though Islam itself is often queered and othered in Western contexts as being odd, different, immoral, old-fashioned, scary, unpredictable, suppressive etc, this sometimes may strengthen the juxtapositions and hinder dialogue between different Muslim communities, possibly forcing some people to resort to rigid interpretations of Islam (cf. Ernst 208-209).

Even if there were some tensions in the process of creating the exhibition, it could be considered positive that the various ideas and ways to relate to Islam were presented simultaneously under the same roof. On the other side, gender and queer perspectives were veiled, especially in the workshops and happenings organised during the exhibitions. Anyhow, the wide variation of artists and artworks relying on different Islamic approaches made more transparent the closeness and common roots and discourses of the Middle-Eastern religions, which have throughout their history lived side by side, and have accepted the concept of multiple revelations and dialogue between each other (Ernst 44-45, Kugle).

Today when people are again scattered and mixed across different continents and countries, we may learn from past dialogues and encounters. At the same time, the postmodern world has its own challenges that every citizen must face. For example, for people of colour, women and sexual minorities, the age we live in has been revolutionary, and enabled exploring border crossings and performing different cultural, "racial," sexual and gender positioning (Anzaldúa, Arrizon, Behar & Gordon, *Women Writing Culture*, Behar, "Between Poetry and Anthropology: Searching for Languages of Home," Hendricks, hooks, Kugle). Gloria Anzaldúa wrote in the eighties that she wanted to be taken seriously in her multiple positions as mestiza, woman and lesbian. She stated that if going home is denied to her, she has to claim her space, making a new culture—una cultura mestiza—with her own lumber, bricks and mortar and her own feminist architecture (Anzaldúa 44).

In the exhibition context, the participant discussing the queer perspective may have experienced similar challenges and wishes as Anzaldúa. The large collection of artworks she presented included photos mainly taken in Lebanon and Morocco. Many of the photos and collages made of the surfaces of the photos presented places and people that expressed her own landscapes of longing and divine places, at the same time exploring various dimensions of border crossings, discussing and challenging gender positionings and delving into the history and beauty of North-African aesthetics and architecture (cf. Anzaldua, hooks

12 In the first exhibition catalogue the participant said more about her sexual identifications, but she decided to change her introduction to the second catalogue.

65). Some of her artworks were more "political," like the photo that presented a crying Lebanese boy with a gun in his hand. On the surface of the photo was a handwritten text: My God is better than yours.

In a series of two works was a photo taken in South Lebanon, presenting a flag honouring Imam Hussain, a founder of the Shia sect who is celebrated as a martyr by Shias. In the pair work, the same photo was presented with the rainbow coloured text of the flag. The Muslim audience reacted strongly to this work, usually because of what the flag symbolised to them: some Sunnis turned their face away, most Shias admired the work. The other artwork that aroused contradictory reactions was a photo of a face that could be recognised as female, even if covered by paint. The work was named Face of God (Figure 4). Some visitors found this Figure insulting, because as they said, according to the Quran, God should not be represented. In the Finnish language we use the same pronoun when referring to male and female, but when speaking English people referred to God as him/male. In one of the other collages by the participant, God's attribute was written in the feminine form, and many Arabic speakers responded to this as a spelling mistake.

Figure 4: Face of God.

Irigaray (150) states that as a young woman she distanced herself from the Roman Catholic tradition, because of the many painful contradictions that were involved in the teachings and theology that were transmitted only by men for centuries. But when she started to discover the religion from different philosophical and spiritual perspectives, she returned to religion in a more enlightened manner, and more autonomously as a woman. I assume that this Finnish-Lebanese participant who in her works, ruptured traditional presentations of femininity, women, gender and sexuality in Islam, merged her own embodied, aesthetic, cultural and social experiences and knowledge to explore the faith and philosophy that has given her inspiration and strength in her life.

For Irigaray (98), art is a way to create another reality that could allow us to live in a more beautiful and happier way. Art is not reliant only on one language but can help us to become able to use all languages, and transform our desires into a path of sharing ourselves and for sharing between us. When reading philosophical, scientific and theological scripts, she found that a woman is the unknown other, the object that has no space to exist, to become You (Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*). Probably, therefore, the notification of sexual difference for her is the first step in sharing. Interestingly, she turned to spirituality to create a new way to communicate, not only between the sexes but also between cultures and religions. However, she reminds us that to develop the spiritual relation between *other as other* we have to abandon dogmatic religious traditions and rely on genuine encounters (Irigaray 172-173). Nikkanen states that Shabestari's declaration "You are the kernel of this world and are at its centre. You are the very spirit of this world" could be interpreted through Buber: "We are one of the many spirits that constitute this world. It is

hidden in our encounter with these many spirits where our feeling of God exists" (Shabestari 268, 61). These spirits that art can bring alive and embody can belong to something greater than our ego and our social structures, offering us new perspectives of ourselves and of the realities we inhabit (cf. Adonis, Nikkanen).

Conclusion

For myself, this three-year journey as a co-researcher with the research participants has been an ongoing learning experience. Through the common process, our shared philosophical, religious and spiritual heritage became embodied and present. I was surprised by the multiple ways the participants related in their artworks to belonging, tradition and the knowledge that being in between different cultural, religious, gender and other normative positions enabled them to explore. In this exploration, the participants leaned on spirituality, Islamic mystics and Sufism, which helped them to present narratives and stories in which they could challenge the dogmatic ideas of religion and reconstruct their personal relationship with Islam.

Based on Sufism, the participants created ideas of encounters and communions that many modern and postmodern writers discussed in previous centuries. A certain search for encounters between fellow humans and encounters between God(s) and Humans seems to be ancient, arising again and again as central questions of our existence and sense of it. People have always used embodied and artistic means to reach the absolute within them and within the universe. It also seems that the relationship between I and You, being that you another human, nature, God or God in I, has always been at the centre of the divine experience. The participants are in the good company of their predecessors, and at the same time creating time-, location- and space-specific images, narrations, interpretations and fresh becomings.

I want to see these revelations as a beginning for many new stories, images and encounters which can help us to find new approaches and discourses in our existing world that is poisoned by Islamophobia and objectification of not only others but even our relationship to ourselves (cf. Buber). For many of the participants, Ummah—the community that unites Muslims from diverse cultural and geographical settings—is one of the communities, among others, on the journey of creating the "Coming Community" that involves individuals with many cultural, religious and spiritual backgrounds and "minoritarian" identities (cf. Agamben, Brehmer, Butler).

Works Cited

Adonis. *Sufism & Surrealism*. Translated Judith Cumberbatch, Saqibooks, 2005.
Agamben, Giorgio. *The Coming Community*. Translated by Michael Hardt, University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
Ashcroft, Bill. *Post-colonial Transformation*. Routledge, 2011.
Ahmed, Leila. *Women and Gender in Islam. Historical Roots of Modern Debate*. Yale University Press, 1992.
Ahmed, Sara. *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality*. Routledge, 2000.
Aitken, Stuart. *The Ethnopoetics of Space and Transformation: Young People's Engagement, Activism and Aesthetic*. Routledge, 2014.
Anthias, Floya. "Transnational Mobilities, Migration Research and Intersectionality. Towards a Translocational Frame." *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*, vol. 2, 2012, pp. 102-110.
Anzaldúa, Gloria. *Borderlands/La Frontera*. Aunt Lute Books, 1999.
Armour, Ellen. *Deconstruction, Feminist Theology, and the Problem of Difference: Subverting the Race/Gender Divide*. University of Chicago Press, 1999.
Arrizon, Alicia. *Queering Mestizaje. Transculturation and Performance*. The University of Michigan, 2006.
Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard, Noonday Press, 1990.
Behar, Ruth. "Between Poetry and Anthropology: Searching for Languages of Home." *Arts-based Research in Education: Foundations for Practice*, edited by Melisa Cahnmann-Taylor and Richard Siegesmund, Routledge, 2008, pp. 55-71.
Behar, Ruth and Gordon, Deborah. *Women Writing Culture*. University of California Press, 1995.
Bhabha, Homi. "Culture's In-Between." *Questions of Cultural Identity*, edited by Start Hall and Gay, Paul Gay, Sage Publications, 1996, pp. 53-60.
---. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1998.
Blanchot, Maurice. *The Unavowable Community*. Translated by Pierre Joris, Station Hill Press, 1998.
Brah, Avtar. *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*. Routledge, 1996.

---. "Difference, Diversity, Differentiation." *Feminism and "Race."* edited by Kum-Kum Bhavnani, Oxford University Press, 2001, pp. 456-78.
Brehmer, Marian. "Sufism and the Power to Transform." *Qantara.de,* 2016. en.qantara.de/content/interview-with-mevlevi-sheikh-kabir-helminski-sufism-and-the-power-to-transform.
Buber, Martin. *I and Thou*. T. & T. Clark, 1970.
Butler, Judith. "Competing Universalities." *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality. Contemporary Dialogues of the Left*, edited by Judith Butler, Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek, Verso, 2000, pp. 136–81.
Cixous, Hèlene *Stigmata: Escaping Texts*. Routledge, 2005.
Davies, Sharyn. *Gender Diversity in Indonesia: Sexuality, Islam and Queer Selves*. Routledge, 2010.
Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. "On the Line." *Semiotext(e)*, 1983.
Derrida, Jacques. "Khora" *On the Name: Crossing Aesthetics*., edited by Thomas Dudoit. Translated by David Wood, John Leavey and Ian McLeod. Stanford University Press, 1995, pp. 89–130.
Ernst, Carl. *Following Muhammad. Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2003.
Fanon, Franz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philsoc. Pluto Press, 1986.
Green, Nile. *Sufism. A Global History*. Wiley-Blackwell, 2012
Hall Stuart. "The Question of Cultural Identity." *Modernity and its Futures*, edited by Hall, Stuart Hall, David Held and Tony McGrew, Polity Press, 1992, pp. 274-80.
Hamzic, Vanja. *Sexual and Gender Diversity in the Muslim World. History, Law and Vernacular Knowledge*. I. B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2016.
Hendricks, Pepe. *Hijab. Unveiling Queer Muslim Lives*. Inner Circle, 2009.
hooks, bell. *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics*. The New Press, 1995.
Hua, Ang. "Homing Desire, Cultural Citizenship, and Diasporic Imaginings." *Journal of International Women's Studies* vol. 12, no. 4, 2011, pp. 45-56.
Irigaray, Luce. *Key Writings*. London. Continuum, 2004.
---. *This Sex Which Is Not One.* Translated by Catherine Porter and Carolyn Burke. Cornell University Press, 1985.
Jama, Afdhere. *Queer Jihad. LGBT Muslims on Coming Out, Activism and the Faith*. Oracle Releasing, 2013.
Kristeva, Julia. *Puhuva Subjekti: Tekstejä 1969-1993*. Translated by Pia Sivenius, Tiina Arppe & Kirsi Saarikangas. Tammer-Paino Oy, 1993.
Kugle, Scott. *Homosexuality in Islam. Critical Reflection on Gay, Lesbian, and Transgender Muslims.* Oneworld, 2010.
Minh-ha, Trinh. *Elsewhere, Within Here: Immigration, Refugeeism and the Boundary Event.* Routledge, 2011.
---. "Not You/Like You: Post-Colonial Women and the Interlocking Questions of Identity and Difference. Feminism and the Critique of Colonial Discourse." *Inscriptions* **3-4**.1998. culturalstudies.ucsc.edu/inscriptions/volume-34/trinh-t-minh-ha/.
Mitchell, Andrew and Winfree, Jason. *The Obsessions of George Bataille. Community and Communication.* State University Press, 2009.
Nikkanen, Luke. The Divinity in our Relationships: An Dialogue Between Buber and Shabestari. 2016languages.oberlin.edu/blogs/relg270/luke-nikkanen-dialogue-between-buber-and-shabestari-final-paper/.
Nizamie, Hague, Katshu, Mohammad & Uvais N.A. "Sufism and Mental Health." *Indian Journal of Psychiatry*. Jan.2013 vol. 55, 2013, pp. 215-23.
Oikarinen-Jabai, Helena. "Young Finnish Somalis Exploring their Belonging within Participatory Performative Research." *Contested Belonging: Spaces, Practices, Biographies*, edited by Kathryn Davis, Halleh Ghorashi and Peer Smets Emerald, 2018, pp. 233-59.
O'Neill, Maggie. "Transnational Refugees: The Transformative Role of Art?" *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, vol.9, no. 2, art. 59. 2008, pp. 1-23. www. qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/403/873Social.
---. "Making Connections: Ethno-mimesis, Migration and Diaspora." *Psychoanalysis, Culture and Society*, vol.14, no, 3, 2009, pp. 289-302.
Perlina, Nina. "Bakhtin and Buber: Problems of Dialogic Imagination." *Studies in 20th Century Literature*. 1984newprairiepress.org/sttcl/vol9/iss1/3
Rolling, James. "A Paradigm Analysis of Arts-based Research and Implications for Education." *Studies in Art Education*, vol. 51, no. 2, 2010, pp. 102-14.
St. Pierre, Elisabeth. "Writing as a Method of Nomadic Inquiry." *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Inquiry*, edited by Norman Denzin and Yvonne Lincoln, Sage, 2005, pp. 967-73.
Subhan, John. *Sufism, its Saints and Shrines*. Cosmo Publications, 1999.
Yuval-Davis, Nira. *Power, Intersectionality and the Politics of Belonging*. FREIA working paper series no. 75. Department of Culture and Global Studies, Aalborg University, 2012.
---. *Gender & Nation*. Sage, 1997.